John Birkbeck
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SHORT ACCOUNT

OF THE

PLAGUE,

Which prevailed in the City of LONDON, in the Year 1665;

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Extracted from the Memoirs of a Perſon who reſided there, during the whole Time of the Infection.

O that they were wiſe, that they underſtood this, that they would conſider their latter End.

Deut. xxxii. 29.

WHITBY:

PRINTED BY C. WEBSTER. 1793.

BRITISH MUSEUM

AMONGST the many Calamities with which the Almighty is pleaſed to viſit the Children of Men, in order to reduce them to a juſt Senſe of their Weakneſs, and an entire Dependance upon him, there are ſcarcely any that are more productive of true penitent Humiliation, and a Sight of what is really Good, and truly Evil, than thoſe contagious Diſtempers which an offended God, ſometimes, ſuffers to rage amongſt the People. In the Year 1665, the City of LONDON was ſorely viſited by the Plague: an Account of the Progreſs and Effects of that Viſitation, was kept by a Citizen who remained there during the whole Time of the Sickneſs, and who appears to have been candid and judicious in his Remarks. It is hoped the Reader will, in a ſhort Deſcription of that memorable Judgment, meet with ſome Leſſons of beſt Wiſdom, and derive Inſtruction from this cloſe and ſerious Converſe with Death and the Grave.

THE Introduction of this Contagion in LONDON, was by ſome Goods imported from HOLLAND, which had been brought thither from the Levant. It firſt broke out in the Houſe where thoſe Goods were opened, from whence it ſpread to other Houſes. In the firſt Houſe that was infected, there died four Perſons: a Neighbour who went to viſit them, on returning Home, gave the Diſtemper to her Family, and died with all her Houſhold. The Pariſh Officers who were employed about the ſick Perſons being alſo infected, the Phyſicians perceived the Danger, and upon narrow Inſpection were aſſured, that it was indeed the Plague, with all its

terrifying Particulars, and that it threatened a general Infection. The People began now to be alarmed all over the Town; the uſual Number of Burials, within the Bills of Mortality for a Week, were generally about 240 to 300; but from the 24th to the 27th of January, the printed Bill was 474. However, this went off again, and the Froſt continuing very ſevere, till near the End of February, the Bills decreaſed again, and People began to look upon the Danger as good as over; but in May, the Bills greatly increaſed, and the Weather becoming hot, the Infection ſpread again, in a dreadful Manner.

I lived, ſays the Author, without Aldgate, and as the Diſtemper had not reached to that Side of the City, our Neighbourhood continued eaſy; but at the other End of the Town, the Conſternation was very great; and the Nobility and Gentry thronged out of the Town, with their Families, in an unuſual Manner. Nothing was to be ſeen but Waggons, Carts, and Coaches, with Goods and People, and Horſe-men attending them, hurrying away; then empty Waggons and Carts appeared, which were apparently returning to fetch more People: beſides innumerable Numbers of People on Horſeback, fitted out for travelling. This was a very melancholy Proſpect; indeed there was Nothing elſe of Moment to be ſeen; it filled my Mind with very ſerious Thoughts of the Miſery that was coming upon the City, and the unhappy Condition of thoſe who would be left in it. By the End of July, the Contagion had ſpread and increaſed to a great Degree: Sorrow and Sadneſs ſat upon every Face; and tho' ſome Parts were not yet overwhelmed, all looked deeply concerned. LONDON might well be ſaid to be all in Tears; the Mourners did not go about the Streets, for Nobody made a formal Dreſs of Mourning for their neareſt Relations; but

the Voice of Mourning, was, indeed, heard in the Streets; the Shrieks of Women and Children at the Windows and Doors of their Houſes, where their deareſt Relations were dying, were ſo frequent to be heard, as we paſſed the Streets, that it was enough to pierce the ſtouteſt Heart in the World. Tears and Lamentations were perceived in almoſt every Houſe, eſpecially in the firſt Part of the Viſitation; for, towards the latter End, People did not ſo much concern themſelves for the Loſs of their Friends, expecting that themſelves ſhould be ſummoned the next Hour.

It was a Time of very unhappy Breaches amongſt us, in Matters of Religion; Diviſions, and ſeparate Opinions prevailed; the Church of England was lately reſtored, and the Preſbyterians and other Profeſſions had ſet up their Meetings for Worſhip, and apart, in which they were frequently diſturbed, the Government endeavouring to ſuppreſs their Meetings. But this dreadful Viſitation reconciled the different Parties, and took away all Manner of Prejudice and Scruple from the People. But after the Sickneſs was over, that Spirit of Charity ſubſided, and Things returned to their old Channel again.—Here we may obſerve, that a nearer View of Death, would ſoon reconcile Men of good Principles to one another; and that it is chiefly owing to our eaſy Situations in Life, and our putting theſe Things far from us, that our Breaches are fomented, and that there is ſo much Prejudice and Want of Chriſtian Charity and Union amongſt us. A cloſe View and Converſe with Death, or with Diſeaſes that threaten Death, would ſcum off the Gall of our Tempers, remove our Animoſities, and bring us to ſee with different Eyes. On the other Side of the Grave, we ſhall all be Brethren again.

The Inns of Court were now all ſhut up; there were but

few

few Lawyers to be ſeen in the City; indeed there was no Need of them, for Quarrels and Diviſions about Intereſt had ceaſed; every Body was at Peace.

It was alſo worthy of Obſervation, as well as fruitful of Inſtruction, to remark with what Alacrity the People, of all Perſuaſions, embraced the Opportunities they had of attending upon the Public Worſhip, and other appointed Times of Devotion, as Humiliations, Faſtings, and public Confeſſion of Sins, to implore the Mercy of God, and avert the Judgment which hung over their Heads. The Churches were ſo thronged, that there was, often, no coming near; no, not to the very Door of the largeſt Churches. There were alſo daily Prayers appointed, Morning and Evening, at which the People attended with uncommon Devotion.

All Plays and Interludes, which had lately begun to increaſe amongſt us, were forbid to act; the Gaming-Tables, public Dancing-Rooms, and Muſic-Houſes, which multiplied, and began to debauch the Manners of the People, were ſhut up and ſuppreſſed; finding no Trade, for the Minds of the People were generally humbled and agitated with other Things: Death was before their Eyes, and every Body began to think of their Graves.

The Infection ſtill gradually increaſed, till the Middle of Auguſt, when there died a Thouſand a-Day, by the Account of the weekly Bills, though they never gave a full Account, by many Thouſands: many of the Pariſh-Officers were taken ſick themſelves, and died when their Account was to be given in. The Pariſh of Stepney alone, had, within the Year, one Hundred and ſixteen Sextons, Grave-Diggers, Carriers of the Dead, &c. Indeed the Work was not of a Nature to allow them Leiſure to take an exact Tale of the

dead

dead Bodies, which were all thrown together in the Dark, in a Pit, to which no Man could come near without the utmoſt Peril.

I had, ſays the Author, the Care of my Brother's Houſe, which obliged me ſometimes to go abroad. In theſe Walks, I had diſmal Scenes before my Eyes, as, particularly of Perſons falling dead in the Streets, terrible Shrieks of Women, who, in their Agonies, would throw open their Chamber-Windows, and cry out in a diſmal, ſurpriſing Manner. It is impoſſible to deſcribe the Variety of Poſtures in which the Paſſions of the poor People would expreſs themſelves.—Paſſing through Token-Houſe Yard, of a ſudden, a Caſement violently opened juſt over my Head, and a Woman gave three frightful Screeches, and then cried, "*Oh! Death, Death, Death!*" which ſtruck me with Horror, and cauſed a Chilneſs in my very Blood. There was no Body to be ſeen in the whole Street, neither did any Window open, for People had no Curioſity, now, in any Caſe. I went on to paſs into *Bell Alley*, where there was a greater Cry than that; I could hear Women and Children run ſcreaming about the Rooms like diſtracted Perſons; when a Garret-Window opened, and ſome Body from a Window on the other Side, aſked, What is the Matter? Upon which it was anſwered, "*O Lord! my old Maſter has hanged himſelf!*" The other aſked again, Is he quite dead? And the firſt anſwered, "*Ay, Ay, quite dead and cold.*" This Perſon was a Deputy Alderman, and very rich. But this is but one Inſtance; it is ſcarce credible, what dreadful Caſes happened in particular Families every Day: People in the Rage of the Diſtemper, or in the Torment of the Swelling, which was indeed intolerable, becoming raving and diſtracted, oftentimes laid violent Hands upon themſelves, or threw themſelves out of the

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Windows; or breaking out of the Houſes, would dance naked about the Streets, not knowing one Extaſy from another; others, if not prevented, would run directly down the River, and plunge into the Water. Some died of meer Grief as a Paſſion, and ſome of Fright and Surpriſe, without having received the Infection. It often pierced my very Soul, to hear the Groans and Cries of thoſe who were thus tormented. But this of the Swellings was accounted the moſt promiſing particular, in the whole Infection; for if theſe Swellings could be brought to break and run, the Patient generally recovered: whereas, thoſe who were ſtruck with Death at the beginning of the Diſtemper, and had Spots come upon them, often went about indifferent eaſy, till a little before they died, and ſome till the Moment they dropped down; ſuch would be taken ſuddenly very ſick, and would run to ſome convenient Place, or to their own Houſes, if poſſible, and there ſit down, grow faint, and die.

The Method the Magiſtrates fell into, of locking up the Doors of People's Houſes, where any had taken the Diſtemper, and ſetting Watchmen there Night and Day, to prevent any going out to ſpread the Infection, looked hard and cruel, as, perhaps, thoſe who were found in the Family, might have eſcaped, if they had been removed from the Sick; but the public Good ſeemed to juſtify ſuch a Conduct, and there was no obtaining the leaſt Mitigation by any Application to the Magiſtrates. This put People, who thought themſelves well, upon many Stratagems to get out of their Confinements. Going out one Morning, I heard a great Outcry, which prompting my Curioſity, I inquired the Cauſe of a Perſon who looked out of a Window. A Watchman had been employed to watch at the Door of a Houſe, which was infected and ſhut up; both himſelf and the Day Watchman, attended

attended there a Day and two Nights. All this while no Noiſe had been heard, nor Lights ſeen in the Houſe; neither had they called for any Thing. It ſeems that, two or three Days before, the Dead-Cart had ſtopped there, and a Servant-Maid had been brought down to the Door dead, wrapped only in a green Rug, which the Buriers had put into the Cart and carried away: the next Day, the Watchman heard great crying and ſcreaming in the Houſe, which he ſuppoſed was occaſioned by ſome of the Family dying juſt at that Time; upon which he knocked at the Door a great while: at laſt, one looked out, and ſaid with an angry, quick Tone, and a Voice of one who was crying, "*What d'ye want, that ye make ſuch a Knocking?*" He anſwered, "*I am the Watchman; How do you do? What is the Matter?*" The Perſon anſwered, "*What is that to you? Stop the Dead-Cart.*" This was about one o'Clock; ſoon after, he ſtopt the Dead-Cart, and then knocked again, but no Body anſwered: He continued knocking, and the Bell-man called ſeveral Times, "*Bring out your Dead;*" but no Body anſwered, till the Man who drove the Cart, being called to other Houſes, would ſtay no longer, and drove away. In the Morning, when the Day Watchman came in, they knocked at the Door a great while; but no Body anſwering, they got a Ladder, and one of them went up to the Window, and looking into the Room, he ſaw a Woman lying dead upon the Floor, in a diſmal Manner: but though he called aloud, and knocked hard on the Floor with his Staff, no Body ſtirred or anſwered. This they made known to the Magiſtrate, who ordered the Houſe to be broke open, when no Body was found in the Houſe, but that young Woman; who having been infected, and paſt Recovery, the Reſt had left her to die by herſelf, and were every one gone, having found ſome Way

to delude the Watchman, and go out. As to thoſe Cries and Shrieks, which he heard, it was ſuppoſed, they were the paſſionate Cries of the Family, at the bitter parting, which, to be ſure, it was to them all; this being the Siſter to the Miſtreſs of the Family.

Many more Inſtances might be given; but theſe may ſuffice to ſhew the deep Diſtreſs of that Day. Death did not now hover over every one's Head only, but looked into their Houſes and Chambers, and even ſtared in their very Faces; and though there were ſome Stupidity and Dulneſs of Mind, yet there was a great Deal of juſt Alarm ſounded in the inmoſt Soul: many Conſciences were awakened; many hard Hearts melted; many a penitent Confeſſion was made of Crimes long concealed. People might be heard, even in the Streets, as we paſſed along, calling upon God for Mercy, through Jesus Christ; and ſaying, "I have been a Thief,"—"I have been an Adulterer,"—"I have been a Murderer,"—and the like; and none durſt ſtop to make Inquiry into ſuch Things, or to adminiſter Comfort to the poor Creature, who, in the Anguiſh both of Soul and Body, thus cried out. Many were the Warnings that were then given by dying Penitents, to others, not to put off and delay their Repentance to a Day of Diſtreſs; that ſuch a Time of Calamity as this, was no Time for Repentance. I wiſh (ſays the Author) I could repeat the very Sound of thoſe Groans and Exclamations, that I heard from ſome poor dying Creatures, when in the Height of their Agonies and Diſtreſs; and that I could make him who reads this hear as, I imagine, I now hear them; for the Sound ſeems ſtill to ring in my Ears.

In the Beginning of September, the Number of Burials increaſing, the Church-Wardens of Aldgate Pariſh ordered

a large Pit to be dug, to hold all the Dead which might di in a Month; it was about forty Feet long, and ſixteen broad Some blamed the Church-Wardens for ſuffering ſuch a fright ful Gulf to be dug; nevertheleſs, in two Weeks, they ha thrown more than eleven hundred Bodies into it, when the were obliged to fill it up, as the Bodies were come within ſi Feet of the Surface. My Curioſity drove me to go and ſe this Pit, when there had been near four hundred People bu ried in it. I got Admittance into the Church-Yard by mean of the Sexton, who was a ſenſible, religious Man; he woul have perſuaded me not to go, ſaying, "*That it was, indeed their Duty to venture, and in it, they might hope to be preſerved but that, as I had no apparent Call, he thought my Curioſity coul not juſtify my running that* Hazard." I told him, "*I had bee preſſed in my Mind* to go; *and that, perhaps, it might be an in ſtructing Sight.* "*Nay,*" ſays the good Man, "*if you will ven ture upon that Score, in the Name of GOD go in; it will be a Sermon to you, it may be the beſt that ever you heard in your Life.*" His Diſcourſe had ſhocked my Reſolution, and I ſtood wa vering for a good while; but juſt then I heard the Bell-Man and the Cart loaded with dead Bodies appearing, I went in There was no Body, as I could perceive at firſt, with the Cart, but the Buriers and the Man who led the Cart; bu when they came to the Pit, they ſaw a Man muſled in a Cloak who appeared in great Agony. The Buriers immediately ga thered about him, ſuppoſing he was one of thoſe poor deli rious or deſperate Creatures, who would ſometimes run to the Pit, wrapt in Blankets, and throw themſelves in; and, as they ſaid, bury themſelves. When the Buriers came to him, they ſoon found he was neither deſperate nor diſtemper ed in Mind, but one oppreſſed with a dreadful Weight of Grief, having his Wife and ſeveral Children all in the Cart that was juſt come in with him, and he followed in Agony

nd Exceſs of Sorrow. He calmly deſiring the Buriers to et him alone, ſaid he would only ſee the Bodies thrown in, nd go away; ſo they left importuning him; but no ſooner was the Cart turned round, and the Bodies ſhot into the Pit promiſcuouſly, which was a Surpriſe to him, for he at leaſt expected, they would have been decently laid in, though indeed he was afterwards convinced that was impractible; I ſay, no ſooner did he ſee the Sight, but he cried out aloud, unable to contain himſelf, and fell down in a Swoon. The Buriers ran to him, and took him up, and when he came to himſelf, led him to a Place where he was taken Care of. He looked into the Pit again, as he went away, but the Buriers had covered the Bodies ſo immediately, with throwing Earth, that Nothing could be ſeen. The Cart had in it ſixteen or ſeventeen Bodies. Some were wrapt up in Linen Sheets, ſome in Rugs, ſome little other than naked, or ſo looſe, that what Covering they had fell from them, in the ſhooting out of the Cart, and they fell quite naked among the Reſt: but the Matter was not much to them, or the Indecency much to any one elſe, ſeeing they were to be huddled together into the common Grave of Mankind; for here was no Difference made, but Poor and Rich went together; there was no other Way of Burials, neither was it poſſible there ſhould.

John Hayward under-Sexton, Grave-Digger and Bearer of the Dead, never had the Diſtemper at all, but lived about twenty Years after it. His Wife was employed to nurſe the infected People; yet ſhe herſelf never was infected. The only Preſervative he uſed againſt the Infection, was holding Garlic and Rue in his Mouth, and ſmoaking Tobacco; this I had from his own Mouth. His Wife's Remedy was waſhing her Head in Vinegar, and ſprinkling her Head-Cloths ſo with Vinegar, as to keep them always moiſt; and if the Smell

of

of any of thoſe ſhe waited on, was more than ordinary offenſive, ſhe ſnuffed Vinegar up her Noſe, ſprinkled her Head-Cloths, and held an Handkerchief, wetted with Vinegar, to her Mouth.

And here I muſt not omit mentioning the Diſpoſition of the People of that Day, with Reſpect to their Charity to the Poor, which indeed was very large, both in a public and a private Way. Some pious Ladies were ſo zealous in this good Work, and ſo confident in the Protection of Providence in the Diſcharge of this great Duty, that they went about themſelves diſtributing Alms, and viſiting the poor Families who were infected, in their very Houſes, appointing Nurſes and Apothecaries to ſupply them with what they wanted. Thus giving their Bleſſings to the Poor, in ſubſtantial Relief, as well as hearty Prayers for them. I will not undertake to ſay that none of theſe charitable People were ſuffered to die of the Plague; but this I may ſay, that I never knew that any of them miſcarried, which I mention for the Encouragement of others, in Caſe of like Diſtreſs; and doubtleſs, if they "*that give to the Poor, lend to the Lord, and he will repay it,*" thoſe who hazard their Lives to give to the Poor, and to comfort and aſſiſt them in ſuch a Miſery as this, may hope to be protected therein.

From the Middle of Auguſt to the Middle of September, the Infection ſtill increaſed, and ſpread itſelf with an irreſiſtible Fury; it was reckoned that, during that Time, there died no leſs than ſixteen Hundred a Day, one Day with another. It was then that the Confuſion and Terror was inexpreſſible; the Courage of the People appointed to carry away the Dead, began to fail them: the Vigilance of the Magiſtrates was now put to the utmoſt Trial. At laſt the Violence of the Diſtemper came to ſuch a Height, that the People ſat ſtill looking at one another, and ſeemed quite aban-

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doned to Deſpair. In a Word, People began to give themſelves up to a Fear, that there was Nothing to be expected, but an univerſal Deſolation. This Deſpair made People bold and venturous; they were no more ſhy of one another, as expecting there was now no avoiding the Diſtemper, but that all muſt go; this brought them to croud into the Churches; they inquired no more what Condition the People who ſat near them were in, but looking upon themſelves all as ſo many dead Corps, they came to the Churches without the leaſt Caution, and crouded together, as if their Lives were of no Conſequence, compared to the Work which they were come about. Indeed, their Zeal in coming, and the Earneſtneſs and affectionate Attention they ſhewed to what they heard, made it manifeſt, what Value People would put upon the Worſhip of God, if they thought every Day they attended at the Church, would be their laſt.

It was in the Height of this Deſpair, that it pleaſed God to ſtay his Hand, and to ſlacken the Fury of the Contagion, in a Manner as ſurpriſing as that of its Beginning; and which demonſtrated it to be his own Particular Hand, above the Agency of Means. Nothing but Omnipotent Power could have done it: the Contagion deſpiſed all Medicine; Death raged in every Corner; and had it gone on as it did then, a few Weeks more would have cleared the Town of all its Inhabitants. In that very Moment, when thirty Thouſand were dead in three Weeks, nay, when it was reported three Thouſand had died in one Night, and an Hundred Thouſand more were taken ſick; when we might well ſay, *Vain was the Help of Man*, it pleaſed God to cauſe the Fury of it to abate, and by his immediate Hand to diſarm the Enemy. It was wonderful! The Phyſicians were ſurpriſed, wherever they viſited, to find their Patients better, and in a few Days every

every Body was recovering. Nor was this by any Medicine found out, or any new Method of Cure diſcovered; but it was evidently from the ſecret inviſible Hand of him who had at firſt ſent this Diſeaſe, as a Judgment upon us. Let the Philoſophers ſearch for Reaſons in Nature to account for it, and labour, as much as they will, to leſſen the Debt they owe to their Maker; thoſe Phyſicians who had the leaſt Share of Religion in them, were obliged to acknowledge that it was all ſupernatural. The Streets were now full of poor recovering Creatures, who appeared very ſenſible and thankful to GOD for their unexpected Deliverance: yet I muſt own, that as to the Generality of the People, it might too juſtly be ſaid of them, as was ſaid of the Children of *Iſrael*, after they had been delivered from the Hoſt of *Pharaoh*;— "*That they ſung his Praiſe, but they ſoon forgot his Works.*"

THE Author, who was preſerved unhurt, with his whole Family, during the Time of the Sickneſs, gives, in his Memoirs, a particular Account of the many Reaſonings and Fears which affected his Mind, before he could come to a fixed Concluſion, whether to ſtay and take his Lot in the Station in which GOD had placed him, or by leaving the City run the Hazard of unſettling himſelf, and loſe his Effects, which lay ſcattered amongſt the Merchants. At the earneſt Solicitations of his Brother, he had concluded to go, but being always croſſed in this Deſign, by ſeveral Accidents, it came, one Morning, as he expreſſes it, very warmly in his Mind, whether theſe repeated Diſappointments were not Intimations to him, that it was the Will of Heaven he ſhould not go; which was ſucceeded by a farther Thought, that if this Suggeſtion was from GOD, he was able effectually to preſerve him, in the Midſt of all Deaths and Dangers that would ſurround him, and that if he attempted to ſecure himſelf.

ſelf, by fleeing from his Habitation, and acting contrary to theſe Intimations, which he believed to be divine, it was a Kind of flying from GOD, who could cauſe his Juſtice to overtake him, when, and where he thought fit.

BUT what finally fixed him in a Reſolution to ſtay, and caſt himſelf, entirely, upon the Protection and good Pleaſure of the Almighty, was, that at a Time when his Thoughts were more than commonly ſerious upon this weighty Subject, turning over the Bible which lay before him, he cried out; *Well, I know not what to do, Lord, direct me!* At that Juncture, happening to ſtop, and caſting his Eye on the ſecond Verſe of the 91ſt *Pſalm*, he read to the 10th, as follows; "*I will ſay of the Lord, He is my Refuge, and my Fortreſs, my GOD, in him will I truſt. Surely he ſhall deliver thee from the Snare of the Fowler, and from the noiſome Peſtilence. He ſhall cover thee with his Feathers, and under his Wings ſhalt thou truſt: his Truth ſhall be thy Shield and Buckler. Thou ſhalt not be afraid for the Terror by Night, nor for the Arrow that flieth by Day: nor for the Peſtilence that walketh in Darkneſs: Nor for the Deſtruction that waſteth at Noon-Day. A Thouſand ſhall fall at thy Side, and ten Thouſand at thy right Hand; but it ſhall not come nigh thee. Only with thine Eyes ſhalt thou behold and ſee the Reward of the Wicked. Becauſe thou haſt made the Lord which is thy Refuge, even the Moſt High thy Habitation: there ſhall no Evil befal thee, neither ſhall any Plague come nigh thy Dwelling; &c.*"

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FINIS.